

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

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Teachings of a Pandemic

My experience with the coronavirus pandemic, perhaps like that of most people, is one of fear and anger, loss and grief. Yet, along with the anguish caused by this plague, I have found unexpected joy in lessons learned about humanity, faith, and love.

As a result of COVID, I've become available to help my daughter, who manages a busy work schedule by driving my two grandkids to pre-school on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Hannah is four and Jeremy two. Since the coronavirus shutdown, the pre-school operated by our synagogue is one of the few places open for toddlers to spend time out of the house.

While adults forgo dinners with friends, movies out and museum visits, young children are also limited in places to go to let off steam. My daughter, Andrea, has been tearing her hair out trying to find activities for the kids. The local playground is closed, its equipment covered with yellow tape. The aquarium is cleared of visitors, and the market is no longer a place to bring kids and lollygag around. So Andrea was thrilled, actually elated, when the synagogue pre-school reopened.

This is the same synagogue where, twenty years earlier, my three girls attended Hebrew school, studying for their bat-mitzvahs. Back then I drove the carpool many afternoons, listening in on shared pre-teen conversation, finding out who the mean girls were, and which girls were dorks, which boys were cool and which weren't. So now, I enjoy the ten-minute drive from Andrea's house to the preschool with my two young grandchildren because, as I've learned over the years, it allows for conversation. At this point in the life of Hannah and Jeremy, discussions uninterrupted by running or fighting or requests for food, water or potty breaks, are a rare commodity.

It's a Thursday morning, and like most Thursdays in Southern California, the sky is bright with an occasional seagull riding the breeze, sun streams through trees to create shadows on roads, and the air fills with the briny scent of the ocean. I pick up the kids, grab the lunchboxes, water containers, and required masks, wave good-bye to Andrea, and strap Hannah and Jeremy into their car seats. Hannah has begun wearing her brown shoulder length hair in a ponytail, which makes her look older and more like her mom each day. Jeremy now voices his opinions, telling me that he loves dump trucks.

The Disney movie, *Frozen*, is currently their favorite soundtrack, so my fingers run on automatic as I turn on the music. Now that public schools are virtual, the roads are clear, free of morning school traffic. We zip along, masked up, windows cracked open for air circulation, coasting and listening to music.

As we pull into the preschool parking lot, Hannah says, "Grandma, when I'm bigger, too big to live at home, I'm gonna live at your house."

I'm completely unprepared for her solution to adulthood. I don't know exactly how to respond, and I wonder where Hannah has learned that kids grow up and leave their parents' home. I imagine when she absorbed

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this information she figured she would move away from home, but not too far. I like that she is already considering her future. Hannah is not one to be caught without a plan. In that way, she is a girl like me.

There is no reason to tell a four-year-old that her life is barely beginning and that she will have many people to love and who love her. Knowing that someday a best friend, and then a boyfriend will replace me, I go with her idea for the moment.

“Okay Hannah, that sounds good. You’ll live at my house,” I say.

She appears satisfied, and looks out the window, her unicorn patterned facemask slipping down below her nose.

To think that earlier that morning I had considered ditching this driving gig to play a tennis match. The only reason I didn’t back out was that I’d sent my husband on Tuesday, and Hannah asked me why I hadn’t come. When I told her Grandpa wanted a turn, she gave me a look that said I’d better not slack off. I’m thankful I decided to drive to have the experience of this conversation.

My heart is buoyant, lifted by Hannah’s fantasy, by the idea that she chooses to live with me in her grown-up life. I reflect that I must have improved upon my mothering skills over the years. Grandparenting has given me another chance to hone those talents, which at times during my parenting years, felt wanting. How many times had I rushed through the carpool drop-off with my own kids, pressured, so that I could make it into work on time or run one more errand? How often had I been distracted by other business of the day, when the real business was right in front of me, raising my girls?

But Hannah’s fantasy of living with me also reminds me of reality— that raising children involves ongoing sweat and effort. As Grandma, I can be more relaxed because I’m not the primary caretaker. I feel less responsible for the outcome. Most importantly, grandparenting comes in doses.

I think back to the times when my girls, each of them two years apart, were young and precious, but lots of work. One afternoon I took them to the park we often visited—a place with open patches of grass, sand, sturdy play equipment, and mask-less children chasing one another before social distancing was a concept and the pandemic became a serious force of nature. I recall trying to keep an eye on all three girls, pushing one on the swings, watching another stuff sand into her mouth, and praying that the third knew how to come down the slide on her own. An older woman, likely a grandmother, walked by, stopped, and said, “Don’t you just love it? Make sure to enjoy every minute. It goes by so fast.” I remember thinking to myself—really? Sometimes the days seemed endless, and the worries ever present; did I handle the sibling rivalry adequately? Was everyone heard? When will these temper tantrums stop? And it felt impossible to savor the moment when I was tired and craved time to myself.

Hannah continues, “I’ll make my bedroom in the family room. On the couch.”

“Okay,” I say.

Our family room’s L-shaped couch offers casual comfort so I under-

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stand its appeal for her. The room is the busiest in the house. We meet there for conversation or to watch television, so I imagine Hannah must want company in her new bedroom. I'm impressed at how thoroughly she has thought out her future life with me, even to the point of deciding where to sleep.

"And, when you drive me when I'm big, I'm gonna sit in the passenger seat, next to you," she says. I glance in the rearview mirror and watch her, gazing out the window from her car seat. She strokes her "love," a stuffed dog, whose fabric is thinning where her fingers find comfort kneading its pile. Jeremy sits silently next to her.

"Okay, I'd like that," I say. I ponder how she envisions the privileges of adulthood. Being driven around in the back seat isn't so bad, I think.

I never thought I would be besotted with my young grandchildren. My friends who are grandparents speak adoringly about cute things grandkids say, and how they love to babysit. For a long time, I didn't get it. Relieved of the more time consuming tethers of motherhood, I enjoyed the fullness of my days. I play tennis, and since COVID, my Zoom book club and art class, and, although retired, I keep up with the literature of psychiatry. I imagine that I would grow bored with the everyday tasks of grandparenting toddlers.

Yet, with the coronavirus I've begun to re-evaluate priorities. Maybe it's the fact that I'm barraged with advice from my three girls about sheltering in place during the pandemic. They remind me that I'm in the vulnerable age group, meaning *old*.

"Mom, *stay home*," they say, repeatedly. "*Stay home*."

And then, Andrea, who works as a labor and delivery nurse, is reassigned to the ICU where she cares for COVID patients. She calls, crying, describing deaths on her shift. It takes an emotional toll on her, as well as on me. I hurt for her, for my own mortality, and for the enormity of loss ushered in by this disease.

I can't escape thinking about life's finite nature. And lest I forget, my body with its familiar aches reminds me of the limits of my years. I've begun to consider what I want to leave behind—how I'd like to be remembered.

Whatever has contributed to the shift in me, as Hannah contemplates her adult living arrangements, I suddenly realize how hooked I am on being Grandma. It's not just the beauty of Hannah. It's the circle of life, *L'dor vador*, and the strength of connection. It's watching my daughter grow, feeling proud, and awed by her steady hand with her kids. It's remembering how far she has come, and how far I've come. This is the blessing of being a grandmother. Now I understand.

I stop to breathe, and take in the moment. Hannah watches out the window to see which friends will be in pre-school that day. Jeremy sneaks in a few more sucks of his thumb before pulling his mask back up. *L'dor vador*. We are the circle. These bonds, my sustenance. Like breath. And air.